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For 1 Minute, It's Hammer And Tongue

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After four weeks of bombast on the House floor, Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) blew the whistle. No more accusations that his celebrated book deal was a thinly disguised kickback, no more calling President Clinton a draft dodger and no more sneering personal attacks on individual members.

"I expect to get punched inside the rules fairly often, and that's fine," Gingrich said Jan. 30. But in an effort to clean up the game for everyone, Gingrich said, the GOP will "police our members," and he asked Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt (D-Mo.) "that at some point the Democrats police their members."

Since then, the House has debated for a little over a week's worth of legislative days. Has the tone moderated? Are members getting down to the serious business of governance? Have they stopped pointing fingers and sneering at their brothers and sisters on the other side of the aisle?

The answers are "Somewhat," "Not always" and "Are you kidding?" Nobody has described a colleague as a "cringing dog" or drawn a firearm on the floor, but plenty of nonsense remains, and the foibles of others are still fair game.

The big print of Rule 14, Clause 1, found on page 520 of "Rules of the House of Representatives"—the chamber's Emily Post—requires that speakers "avoid personality" in their criticisms, and avoid trashing the Senate or its members, a provision frequently honored in the breach.

The fine print also frowns on "vulgarity or profanity," forbids members to talk directly to each other, the gallery, America, the media or anyone else except the chair, and prevents members from wearing "badges" or other emblems to advertise a cause, movement or hair tonic.

Tradition, parliamentary sources said, also frowns on nasty personal references to the president, screaming, unpleasant personal conduct and refusal to sit down when your time's up.

Nasty comments have appeared routinely during House floor debate over the years, but the principal forum for doing damage is the "one minute" period before regular business begins.

Here members are allowed to address a subject of their choosing for 60 seconds, commenting on the news of the day, the mistakes of their enemies and the wonderful things that are happening in their districts and their lives.

It was failure to "avoid personality" that caused most of January's fireworks—specifically Democrats' failure to take it easy on Gingrich, his $4.5 million book advance with publisher Rupert Murdoch and the ethics problems involving his political action committee.

During the first week after Gingrich called time out, the Democrats presented a variety of strategies to cope with the new civility. The first, and most frequently employed, was to lighten up a bit on the name-calling, but otherwise fire at will.

Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) made a daily pest of himself by calling repeatedly for "an independent counsel" to dredge up all the dirt about his Georgia neighbor. On Jan. 31 he named some six-figure contributors to Gingrich's "political machine," asking: "Is it any wonder the speaker wants to keep this list a secret?"

On Feb. 1, Lewis noted "the chorus of respected voices calling for an outside counsel is getting louder and louder," and on Feb. 6, he summed up: "A television station, a political organization, a foundation, even a $4.5 million book deal. It is amazing Speaker Gingrich has any time at all to be speaker of the House."

Other Democrats favored the veiled sneer, neatly handled by Rep. Melvin Watt (D-N.C.), who noted on Jan. 31 that while the GOP was not interested in passing a ban on outside gifts to House members, "the image of our members continues to be battered by book deals and other appearances of impropriety."

Finally, there was the oblique personal attack, in which a point is made by changing the context. Rep. Patricia Schroeder (D-Colo.) came in on a tangent in a Feb. 1 one-minute speech about the daughter of Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping.

"So if anyone now asks what is the similarity between our speaker, Deng Xiaoping's daughter and Mrs. [Margaret] Thatcher, we now know," Schroeder concluded. "They all have Rupert Murdoch book deals." Keep that in your Final Jeopardy file.

Also elegantly oblique was Rep. Robert K. Dornan (R-Calif.), who had had his speaking privileges revoked for a day in January after launching another of many tirades against President Clinton's draft record.

Back at it Feb. 6, Dornan used excerpts from a new Clinton biography to lay waste to the president and predicted Clinton would not be able to run for a second term. But then he concluded by urging colleagues "let us have a civil debate here."

As time passed, the book deal grew stale, but Gingrich conveniently provided some fresh ammo Feb. 7, by agreeing to attend a $50,000-a-plate fund-raiser for the conservative Empowerment Television network.

"Just who is coming to dinner?" asked Minority Whip David E. Bonior (D-Mich.). Rep. Robert E. Wise Jr. (D-W.Va.) described the fund-raiser as "Dining for Dollars," Schroeder branded it "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous come to Washington" and Rep. Rosa L. DeLauro (D-Conn.) decided that, "It is the speaker, not the filet mignon, that is the main course."

Parliamentary sources said a lot of this was actionable, subject to points of order, protests, even

expunging remarks from the record. But having gone that route without success in the opening sessions, the GOP apparently decided to ignore the bad guys and appeal to higher principles.

The Republicans sought a sober tone by opening each day's one-minutes with a reading of Gingrich's "Contract With America," concluding with the solemn words, "This is our Contract With America."

Rep. Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.) endured this "great piety" until Feb. 2, then rose to dismiss what he called the "contract on America" as "a budget buster" that "stands up for the monied interests. . . . At a time when we should put the fat cats in America on a diet," he said, "the Republican contract puts them on the gravy train."

Republicans, naturally, did not roll over for this. Rep. Cass Ballenger (R-N.C.), irritated that the enemy was fogging the nation's business with trivia, remarked on Jan. 30 that the contract "is the change the American people have been waiting for . . . and the Democrats only want to change the subject."

The GOP liked "change the subject" so much that at least one Republican used it every day for a week with dwindling impact. Rep. Martin R. Hoke (R-Ohio) finally salvaged the debate Feb. 3, noting that "some Greek archeologists recently announced that they may have discovered the tomb of Alexander the Great deep in the desert of Western Egypt.

"When they found the body," he added, "it had a laminated copy of the Contract With America in one hand and an ancient hole puncher in the other."

Top that.

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